

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 001660

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS; NSC FOR E. MILLARD

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09-24-13

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINS](#) [PHUM](#) [CASC](#) [MV](#)

SUBJECT: Maldives: Recent rioting in capital sparks questions about stability of Gayoom regime

Refs: Colombo 1648, and previous (Notal)

(U) Classified by James F. Entwistle, Deputy Chief of Mission. Reasons 1.5 (b,d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: A Mission team visited the Maldives, September 22-24. In the aftermath of the rioting that took place on September 20, Male appeared calm with little sign of any tension. In discussions on the unrest, GoRM officials ritually blamed "drug users" and "miscreants." Observers, however, seemed to be more on the mark, commenting that the riots were a function of the government's failure to democratize and engage the "youth bulge." Despite the GoRM's problems, the feeling was that President Gayoom would probably come out on top in the ongoing presidential selection process. That said, the unrest has sparked significant doubts about the stability of his rule. END SUMMARY.

Mission Visit in Aftermath of Unrest

2. (C) Polchief, poloff and a POL FSN visited the Maldives from September 22-24. In the aftermath of the rioting that afflicted the city on September 20 (see Reftel), the atmosphere in Male seemed calm, with students in white uniforms going to school, and tourists snapping photos of the harbor and gold-domed mosque. The only evidence of the recent disturbances was the noticeable presence of security forces in camouflage uniforms patrolling the streets and an armored personnel carrier parked near the presidential palace. Mission did not see any of the several buildings torched by the rioters, however. During the team's September 23 visit, Gan Island, the southern-most in the Maldivian chain, was also placid, with the matter of the riots in Male seemingly as distant as the roughly 500 miles separating the two islands.

Officials Blame "Drug Users"

3. (C) When asked about the September 20 riots, GoRM officials tried hard to make it seem that the situation was now totally fine and that what had happened was a complete anomaly. Mohammed Munavvar, the Attorney General, told the team that "drug users" and "other miscreants" had taken advantage of anger over the death of two prisoners in a government jail to run amok in the capital (there are reports that a third prisoner later succumbed to his wounds). Munavvar emphasized that he did not think there was anything political about the riots in Male, asserting that the unrest had nothing to do with the ongoing presidential selection process (see Para six) or with opposition to President Gayoom. Munavvar added that it was important that the government train guards and upgrade facilities so as to help make sure that prison violence did not erupt ever again. Other government officials that the team met with repeated in almost ritual fashion comments similar to those of Munavvar. The essential message from the GoRM was: the unrest was not pleasant, but everything was now fine again in the Maldives.

Observers see Something Deeper

4. (C) Compared to the almost canned remarks of government officials, other observers seemed to be much more on the mark regarding what was really transpiring. Remarks by Minh Pham, the Amcit head of the UNDP office in Male (pls strictly protect), were particularly interesting. Pham told the team that there was no way that the unrest involved only drug users as claimed by the GoRM. The narcotics problem in the Maldives was a small one and there was no indication that drug users were a force that could riot and attack government property on such a scale, he noted. Based on what he had heard, Pham said he believed that the rioters were mostly unemployed or underemployed youths, who had taken

advantage of the tensions over the killings at the prison to launch attacks on the regime. Many of the rioters were angered that the government was autocratic in attitude and practice, and had failed to democratize the system. These youths, he noted, had attacked symbols of the government, such as the High Court and the Elections Commission. The selection of such targets, when private property was largely left untouched, was a clear sign of the rioters' impatience with President Gayoom and opposition to recent controversial court rulings convicting politicians who were popular with the young of various crimes. Boiling down his points, Pham made clear that he thought that the GoRM had done a very poor job of engaging the country's "youth bulge" (55 percent of the population is under 20). If progress was not made in involving the young in decision-making in some way, Pham predicted that the Maldives would see a repeat of the events of September 20.

15. (C) Like Pham, N.T. Khankhub, the Acting High Commissioner of India, stressed the point that a real "generation gap" was emerging in the Maldives. The president and much of his cabinet were over 60, and were not able to relate well with the much younger bulk of the population. Khankhub, noting that the events of September 20 were "extraordinary" for the normally placid Maldives, said he thought the government had to work harder to relate to youths by providing them more educational and economic opportunities. Some sort of political outlet was also needed, he noted, or the situation would "not be stable" in the future.

Impact on Presidential Selection Process

16. (C) Despite the government's problems, the overall feeling was that President Gayoom probably would come out on top in the ongoing presidential selection process (see Reftels). Khankhub said there was little sign of deterioration in Gayoom's support within regime circles, and he should be able to win the upcoming vote in the Majlis (Parliament) which was packed with hand-chosen loyalists. This vote is scheduled to take place September 24 or 25 and will involve the 50-member Majlis selecting one candidate from the list of four (including Gayoom) approved by the regime. GoRM officials and other observers noted that the other three candidates were not at all well-known, and almost certainly did not stand a chance. Khankhub remarked that once Gayoom got through the Majlis vote he should have no problem with the "yes/no" referendum vote which would take place in two or three weeks. Pham commented that he thought that Gayoom's re-election appeared to be a "formality" unless there were further disturbances that caused Gayoom's supporters to lose faith in him.

COMMENT

17. (C) Although Gayoom might well come out on top in the ongoing presidential selection process, the recent unrest in Male has sparked significant doubts about the stability of his rule. Mission has long noted that the regime is mildly authoritarian and brittle in countenancing political reform. It needs to act quickly to become more inclusive, or there could be more problems on the streets sooner rather than later. Based on what the team heard from GoRM officials, however, there does not seem to be a recognition of any need to change on the part of the regime. This is not good news and could indicate that September 20 was not a one off event, but heralds a new era of confrontational politics in the Maldives. END COMMENT.

18. (U) Minimize considered.

LUNSTEAD